Raymond Mason: a last Romantic? *Scultpure Journal*, vol 19.2. 2010

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Raymond Mason was a Romantic; he liked to compare himself – as a Piscean – to Victor Hugo and *Les Travailleurs de la mer* (1866). He was deeply committed to his art and the long humanist tradition of representation in paint, clay, plaster and bronze, of relief as commemoration, of sculpture as public monument. Not a man for the 'empty plinth', he kept abreast of the British scene - sharks in formaldehyde, heads of frozen blood, the proliferations of Gormleys, Paul Day's giant Saint Pancras lovers, or the work of his true epigone, Ron Mueck - thanks to the curators, friends, and correspondents who would visit him in the Rue Monsieur le Prince near the Luxembourg Gardens.

In France 'too English', in England 'too French' (he lived in Paris from 1946) his work will ultimately transcend these stereotypes. He was proud of his oceanic bronze sculpture *The Crowd* (1968) in the Tuileries Gardens,[1] and the recent installation of *Tragedy in the North, Winter, Rain and Tears* (1977),[2] in the Église Saint-Amié in Lievin, site of the mining disaster of 27 December 1974 (fig. 1); it will be within visiting distance of Kazuoyo Sejima's yet to be completed 'Louvre of the North' in Lens. Mason's *Tragedy in the North*, a major polychrome piece using his characteristically abrupt, raking perspective, with its mourning central female figure, and atmosphere of frozen aftermath – the feel of rain on wet cobblestones almost too real – evidently links him to an English, not a French tradition. This reaches back in time from the trope of the dead miner in D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*, to the plebeian faces in Ford Madox Brown's *Work*, to Hogarth's ribaldry, to Elizabethan polychrome tomb sculpture in parish churches – or before even these, to the traditions of Chaucer and the medieval mystery plays. And yet for every Hogarth one could posit a Daumier. Perhaps one should say that Mason was as French as Handel was English – or more pertinently Louis-François Roubiliac who, in his adopted city, modelled and carved Handel, Sir Isaac Newton and Shakespeare.

A cherished unrealised project of mine concerned Mason's dramatic theatre designs for the 1958 production of Racine's *Phèdre* (Théâtre du Gymnase, music by

Pierre Schaeffer). I wished to use them to illustrate the poet Ted Hughes's own version of *Phèdre*.[3] The purest French classic in its sentiments, its alexandrines, its reduced vocabularies, and suppressed passions, would encounter two Englishmen of the North, men of different landscapes, seasons, rhythms. 'It becomes a dramatic play of immense power. It almost becomes the original Greek tragedy which fired-off the original French but no, because marvellously modern' was Mason's reaction to Hughes's translation.[4] As with Hughes' *Phèdre*, the encounter with France – in Mason's case a new Parisian life – meant not only an intellectual challenge but constant comparisons, constant self-testing.

Born in 1922 to a Scottish pioneer motor mechanic (not the oft-repeated 'taxi-driver') and the daughter of publican, Mason was deeply influenced by his earliest experiences in red-brick industrial Birmingham and its streets: 'I was a working-class boy living in the simplest of working-class areas'. He trained initially at Birmingham School of Arts and Crafts, then at the Royal College of Art and the Slade, when the latter had been evacuated to Oxford; here his painting of the Cadena Café in the High Street acknowledged a formative passion: Manet's *Bar aux Folies-Bergère*, with its strange optics and mirage of a reflected crowd. His wartime ARP duties involved walking through the Ashmolean Museum's arcades of classical casts, however, and he turned to sculpture before he left London: his primitivist stone *Belsen Head* involves reminiscences of Moore and Brancusi,[5] though his *Mandrill* was polychrome - in all the right places. It was abstract, coloured sculpture that he showed at the prominent Galerie Maeght in 1947.

So Mason left austerity London after the Second World War with its 'Freud-Bacon' aesthetic (a favourite joke). Unlike his life-long friend and fellow-traveller, Eduardo Paolozzi, he would never return. He opted for the brilliant intellectual world of Saint Germain des Prés; *declassé* he could participate in a self-reinvention at the very moment when Jean-Paul Sartre was offering such existentialist possibilities to his country at large after the ignominies of Nazi Occupation. The *lingua franca* of the School of Paris put aspirations, talent and discussion above nation or class, while the accents of a Picasso or a Giacometti were just as inflected as Mason's own.

In Paris, the move to sculpture became definitive: he soon entered into a dialogue with the work of Giacometti who would become his friend and mentor. While Giacometti experimented with painting, Mason's adapted a relief format - almost 'sculpture in a

picture frame'. The painter Balthus's enigmatic street scenes influenced the first relief sculpture, which centred on the disturbing gaze of a male head with gouged-out eyes: *Man in a street* (1952, fig. 2), and *Place Saint Germain des Prés* (1953),[6] These links to painting was retained: for like *Paris* (1953, all three bronzes in an edition of 8),[7] these are wall pieces. Though the most evident sculptural precursors of Mason's figurative tableaux would be the narrative reliefs on the four-sided base of commemorative plinths, his crushed perspectives were extraordinary: the tourists' favourite view down on Paris from the top of Montmartre, for example. The critic David Sylvester sensed these disturbing intimations of popular culture, 'the type of decoration sometimes found on cigarette boxes sold as souvenirs', when he first saw the plaster and terracotta versions of the bronze reliefs at Helen Lessore's Beaux-Arts Gallery in London in early 1954. Yet like Giacometti - though so differently - Mason's work insistently poses the question of an 'optics of sculpture'. The sense of space compressed into material, of far compressed into near, persisted with continual daring: compare his flat, painted landscape reliefs of the 1970s which look down and over vast stretches of the Luberon valley with a distant backdrop of the hills of Provence, to the easel-sized polychrome view of the chasm-like drop and streets below as seen from a New York skyscraper, the Twin Towers rising in the distance, of 1987.[8]

Post-war Paris was recalled in all its vivacity and with Mason's particular eye and uninhibited tongue in *At Work in Paris: Raymond Mason on Art and Artists* (2003). Picasso, Bacon, Duchamp, Dubuffet feature with Mason's kindred spirits, Alberto Giacometti and Balthus, along with patrons such as the Rothschilds, the dealers Aimé Maeght, Pierre Matisse and Claude Bernard, musicians like François Poulenc – or the minister André Malraux, who inaugurated the right-bank Centre National d'Art Contemporain in May 1968, with Mason's white plaster version of *The Crowd*, together with sculpture by Etienne-Martin and James Brown; Mason recalled 'utmost calm', while Paris was in flames on the left-bank. Having read every volume of Malraux's *Musée Imaginaire*, Mason was particularly anxious to insist on the importance for his work of *Des bas reliefs aux grottes sacrees* (1953), quoting in *At Work in Paris* how 'the low relief and the high relief make it possible to represent people who don't know each other

or are not in contact with each other, by comparison with the *rond-bosse*, which requires protagonists who touch and know each other'.[9]

Of course, Mason's turn - in fact a return - to polychrome sculpture has always been controversial; in Britain**,** Reg Butler's move to polychrome is an interesting parallel. This came ostensibly after the shock of a Claes Oldenberg retrospective in New York in 1969. It is now too late to ask whether he visited Oldenberg's retrospective with Ileana Sonnabend in Paris in October 1964 – I suspect not – or the little-known exhibition of Oldenberg and his contemporaries in the Musée Rodin in 1965.[10] This certainly had a definitive impact at the time on the sculpture of Alina Szapocznikow, and by 1966 César's monumentally enlarged, coloured *Breast* was decorating the Rochas factory grounds in Poissy. The transition from post-war bronze to the coloured, fluid world of new plastics and poured substances was a given in the Nouveau Réaliste world of critic Pierre Restany and his artists, with their mission to translate into sculpture a 'sociological grasp of the real'. Alternatively it was the moment when Mason's painter-sculptor contemporaries – Miro, Léger, Dubuffet and Niki de Saint Phalle – were all associated with the legendary Robert Haligon and his family of moulders, who were experimenting with new materials, and accepting commissions for large new monuments.[11] Dubuffet's *Group of Four Trees* for the Chase Manhattan Plaza, New York, was completed in 1972, with an accompanying MOMA exhibition, the same year as Mason's peepshow *Crowd in a box* – the miniaturised vision from a diner window of *St Mark's Place, East Village, New York City* (1972, fig. 3).[12] Why should the concept of American Pop Art licence sculpture of burgers and ice-cream, while Mason's cauliflowers – even his American hippies observed from life – disconcert? Why is this turn to polychrome surprising for Mason, whose son-in-law is the 'sculpto-pictorama' creator, Red Grooms, from Nashville, Tennessee? Somehow, Mason's residual humanism and compassion, not to mention the finesse of vision which reappears constantly in his pen and ink drawings, seems to disrupt the pragmatic one-on-one mappings of the Pop Art ethos. Decades after the 1960s, he removed every trace of the contemporary – of advertising and specifically of the burger bar - from his street relief *Latin Quarter* (1989, now in the Maison de Solenn hospital foyer, Boulevard du Port Royal, Paris).[13]

While Oldenburg's ice-creams seem funny, somehow 'normal', with Mason one becomes strangely aware of sculpture's never acknowledged madness of miniaturisation**,** the grandiosity of the 'blow-up', or the sheer bathos of the facsimile object, and the inaccuracy of its colours and textures. This extends even to a bathos implicit in the sculptor's task: I witnessed Mason painting plaster vine-leaves green for the great Tate sculpture *The Grape-Pickers* (shown in Richard Morphet's exhibition *The Hard Won Image* in 1984),[14] with all the passion of a latter day pre-Raphaelite.

Le style c'est l'homme: Mason's written style is likewise hardly the style of today, but like his thought retains the humanism of the immediate post-war era, most evident in his more literary pieces such as the preface for his exhibition catalogue at the Galerie Claude Bernard for *The Departure of Fruit and Vegetables from the Heart of Paris, 28 February, 1969* (Église Saint Eustache, Paris, fig. 4)[15]:

'The certainty I had acquired that a great web held together the subject I wanted to bring to life again had made me decide to sculpt and paint not only the very heart of Paris, but also the things that were to be found there - to their very heart. I would separate each cauliflower cluster, each artichoke leaf, as I would count each window on the streets of Montmartre and Montorgeuil. Like a reservoir of ink, night would have to spread out everywhere, defining the drawing.'

Always caught in a present structured by memory and elegy, even Mason's ideal community of 'the people', is in itself what Michael Edwards has called 'a threatened pastoral': the greengrocers of *The Departure of Fruit and Vegetables*, the mining community in *Tragedy in the North*, with their nostalgic evocations of the Nativity or mourners at the base of a Crucifixion respectively. These 'groundlings' who give the monumental polychrome works their mystery-play elements and Shakespearean dimensions, are based not on citizens of the 1970s, but memories of a community, another country, which he abandoned.

It is a moot point to what extent the resonance and depth of Mason's work is perceived by uninitiated members of the public. One can describe it in terms of extreme accessibility and popular culture: yet a lack of comprehension of his work is not necessarily linked to geography or generation or style, though it may be to all of these. Curiously, Mason's most important collector and patron, William Louis-Dreyfus, while born in France is through and through American; much of Mason's work, once centralised in New York,

may move to a more remote venue. Although commissions such as that for the *Twin Sculptures for Georgetown, Washington DC* (1988, Georgetown Plaza, Washington DC) will remain, of course, *in situ*.[16]

The most virulent debate, and the most dramatic of outcomes surrounded Mason's epic sculpture *Forward*,[17] commissioned in 1988 as the centrepiece of Birmingham's Centenary Square, and inaugurated in 1991(fig.5). Entitled with the city's motto it represented a march into the future, from an industrial past to a multicultural present. The block-like form of open figures (originally initiated by Rodin in *The Burghers of Calais* in 1889) recalled Mason's earlier *Monument for Montreal, An Illuminated Crowd* (1986, Montreal, Louis Dreyfus Property Group),[18] but here, red-brick architecture contrasted with creamy human forms and smoke billowing from factory chimneys. The figures marching forward included a monocled Joseph Chamberlain, and Josiah Mason, forefather of the University, carrying books. The Lady of the Arts, from the city's coat of arms, blew a kiss to the past, while an actress curtsied to the Repertory Theatre. At the inauguration, Mason's protocol-breaking joke to Her Majesty the Queen – that the material of his sculpture would last longer than she would – was alas, a false prophesy. On Maundy Thursday 2003, *Forward* was completely destroyed by fire: it was more than astonishing that this major act of iconoclasm – indeed involving 'youths' (but youths organised and bribed by whom?) passed almost without comment in the mainstream international art press. A poster of the sculpture, surrounded and clambered upon by laughing children was always visible near the small marble table where we used to talk at Mason's home in the rue Monsieur le Prince. *Forward* was as loved for its story, its figures, its nooks and crannies, its photogenic possibilities – as it was derided (so ignorantly) by some as 'socialist realism'.

Despite the dramatic 'evidence' of the photographs of *Forward* smothered in flames (increasing opprobrium in certain quarters) the world-wide commissions of a Dubuffet, de Saint Phalle, or any other artist working with the Haligon foundry, belie any notion of the flammability of the material - polyester resin – hence of an 'accident' with a stray match or even the action of boys with a can or petrol or two. Mason was evidently involved in extensive discussions and correspondence to which I have not had access; but I know his conclusions. Destroying *Forward* was a big job, planned, expensive; a

mystery unsolved. Academic sculptor-of-all trades William Bloye's historicist, frock-coated and gilded *Boulton, Watt and Murdock* (1938-1956) - installed in the square as a substitute on my last visit, and now returned to its original temporary site on Broad Street - embodies the parochial ignorance and lack of taste that Mason understandably wished to escape; [19] Bloye was apparently once his tutor; his three figure group dates from 1956 - one of Mason's most original and creative moments in Paris.[20]

Curiously, the act of arson has retrospectively thrown the artist into an avant-garde company he might have wished to avoid – but which raises interesting questions. Julian Stallabrass's 2007 lecture on 'Contemporary art in a neo-liberal climate' juxtaposed *Forward* with victims of iconoclasm such as Marcus Harvey's *Myra* [Hindley] and Chris Ofili's *Holy Virgin Mary*. Stallabrass's inclusion of Mason contrasts with the humanist – indeed *belle-lettriste* – tradition of writing about the artist, superbly exemplified in Michael Edward's major monograph of 1994. This emphasises the artist's authenticity, indeed his unfashionable moral vision, as exemplified throughout his career from the bronze *Falling Man* (1962, edition of six),[21] to the great white resin *Monument for Montreal*, with its theme of illumination versus ignorance. So much of Mason's work is about crowds looking – at tragedy, at spectacle – from the miniature accident in Rue Monsieur le Prince of 1975 to *Amazement* (2003, Janine Hao Collection, Paris) – his relief sculpture created in response to New York's 9/11 (fig.6). All these looks and the looks solicited from the spectator, contrast with what Edwards has called 'the failure of the glance of the well-informed'.[22]

Mason was proud to be associated with Marlborough Fine Art in London and New York as the gallery of Francis Bacon. He could have had a whole new career had he had the time and desire to invest in the changing London of the 1990s and early 2000s, reinventing himself for a second time with a far younger gallery, with younger energies. Fabrice Hergott, director of the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris offered the most spontaneous and moving tribute to the artist - his originality and quality - in the Église Saint Eustache, where Mason's coffin lay for a few moments at the base of his sculpture *The Departure of Fruit and Vegetables from the Heart of Paris*. This sculptural elegy of the eviction of Paris's market – its Covent Garden – out to the industrialised suburbs, had itself marked the passing of an era. Its coloured plaster depictions of the church's gothic tracery

effected a moving – uncanny - *mise-en-abyme*. Its simple, 'illuminated' folk with the ancient pushcart piled with onions, oranges and leeks , in perfect *praesepio* Nativity crib tradition, joined the crowd of Mason's friends and art-world mourners, prior to his burial in the Cimitière de Montparnasse, in the intensely sculptural company of the great or forgotten dead. Following his Centre Pompidou retrospective in 1985, organised by Gérard Regnier – who as the writer and now member of the French Academy, Jean Clair, was his most eloquent supporter and truest friend in France, and the successful recent showing at the Musée Maillol (2000), will the major Paris exhibition discussed with Hergott now go ahead?[23] What will posterity's verdict be on Mason's 'exalting life' of sculpture?[24]

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[1] See M. Edwards, *Raymond Mason*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1994, pp. 68-86, figs 37, 40-3.
[2] Ibid., pp. 114-123, figs. 58, 61, and details, colour.
[3] Ibid., pp. 45-51, figs. 23-5.
[4] Letter to the author, 3 January 1999.
[5] Edwards as at note 1, fig. 3.
[6] Ibid., fig. 8.
[7] Ibid., fig. 11.
[8] Ibid., figs 71-82, colour, and fig. 93.
[9] André Malraux quoted without reference, in R. Mason, *At Work in Paris, Raymond Mason on Art and Artists*, London, Thames and Hudson, 2003, p. 111.
[10] *États-Unis, Sculptures du XXième siècle*, Musée Rodin, 1965, preface by C. Gold-Scheider.
[11] See G. Haligon, `Un artisan au service des artistes', http://www.lesplastiques.com/gabarit_page.asp?r=1067.
[12] Edwards, as at note 1, fig. 55 and details, colour.
[13] Ibid., fig 108, 110, colour..
[14] Ibid., figs 70, 83, colour.
[15] Ibid., pp. 91-107, fig. 54, and details, colour.
[16] Ibid., pp. 182-191, figs 99,100, 103, colour.
[17] Ibid., pp. 206-17, figs 111, 113, and details, colour.
[18] Ibid., pp. 154-171, figs 85-92, colour.
[19] See entry in G.T. Noszlopy, J. Beech, (ed.), *Public Sculpture of Birmingham*, Liverpool, 1998
[20] The redoubtable Wikipedia entry for Bloye mentions him as a tutor of Mason at Birmingham School of Art; illustrations range from shields, coats of arms and pub signs to council house pillar capitals, a bronze *Apollo fountain* (1939), and several mermaids.
[21] Edwards, as at note 1, fig. 35.
[22] Edwards, as at note 1.Edwards is a poet, critic and Professor at the Collège de France, Paris.
[23] See J. Clair (ed.), *Raymond Mason*, Musée national d' art moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, travelling to the Musée Cantini, Marseilles, 1985-6; the first to write of Mason's death in *Le Figaro*, it was he who persuaded Mason's widow, Mme Janine Hao, to agree to the magnificent service in Saint Eustache, with Jean Guillou at the organ, at which Jean Clair himself gave the most moving funeral oration.
[24] See S. Wilson `Raymond Mason - an Exalting Life', *Raymond Mason, Sculptures and Drawings*, Birmingham City Art Gallery / Lund Humphries, pp. 16-32; see also `Deep in the Heart of Paris' (Raymond Mason), *Times Literary Supplement*, April, 2002; 'In the Community' (Raymond Mason) *Times Literary Supplement*, April 1995; 'Raymond Mason', *Artscribe*, no. 39, London, February, 1983, pp. 40-46.